

CHAPTER 7.

SHOWCASE HYBRIDITY: A ROLE FOR BLOGFOLIOS

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Whether its origins are homegrown, open source, commercial, or common tool, defining an ePortfolio as a “digitized collection of artifacts, including demonstrations, resources, and accomplishments that represent an individual” (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005) has most often resulted in static Web pages or modified content management systems. Yet as new Web technologies emerge, there also arise new opportunities for ePortfolios to become much more dynamic. In particular, merging social media feature sets such as blogging into ePortfolios can help college students enhance their literacy skills, share information, build their reputations, and have an outlet for personal expression within a scholarly and professional online environment.

Even a cursory examination of the EDUCAUSE archives indicates there has been much work done on the opportunities and challenges that result from digital or Web-based portfolios in academe. It is known, for instance, that colleges and universities seeking to establish a student ePortfolio platform that demonstrates knowledge, abilities, and learning for a range of audiences and purposes, including impressing potential employers, are likely to face many of the implementation issues identified by George Lorenzo and John Ittelson (2005): hardware and software, support and scalability, security and privacy, ownership and intellectual property, assessment, acceptance, and long-term viability. Those campuses also confront the question of which ePortfolio vessel to utilize: homegrown, open source, commercial, or common tool. Such matters assume added significance if we heed Kathleen Yancey, Barbara Cambridge, and Darren Cambridge (2009), who assert that “eportfolios may be the most likely vehicle to help us make the transition to an academy of the future that is both relevant and authoritative.”

We accept this potential for ePortfolios and so consider it encouraging that, according to the Campus Computing Project, over the past five years there has been a tripling of American institutions using them (Bass & Eynon, 2009). Nevertheless, for reasons that we will go on to argue, it is simultaneously disheartening to discover that most ePortfolios remain static Web pages or modified content management systems. But as new Web technologies appear, there are simultaneously new openings for ePortfolios to become significantly more vibrant. Particularly, joining social media feature sets such as blogging with ePortfolios can help students enhance their literacy skills and advance their scholarly and professional agendas online. However, the means for developing an ePortfolio system that permits student blogging and is, as Ali Jafari (2004) put it, “sticky,’ ... and is adopted by users” when it moves from concept to working system (p. 38), have thus far not been thoroughly addressed in the higher education literature. To help fill that deficit we discuss a project at the University of Southern California (USC) to implement a blog-based ePortfolio, or “blogfolio.” Through an examination of educational blogging and blogfolios, followed by an assessment of challenges and outcomes, we take the position that if wisely put into effect, hybrid platforms represent a rich and flexible resource waiting to be wielded for the personal, intellectual, and vocational benefit of students.

THE DOMAIN OF EDUCATIONAL BLOGGING

As prelude to our argument for blogfolios, we first wish to make a case on behalf of blogging. It is obvious that the blogosphere is a flourishing cyber-realm, and while the many emphases of blogs not surprisingly differ, data from the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Lenhart & Fox, 2006) reveal that the most popular blogging topic, at least here in the United States, is one’s own life and experiences. A self-referential use of weblogs certainly has merit; however, for those who are charged with guiding university students deeply into their majors and toward their careers, we are not convinced that an expressivist ambit, with the blog as personal journal, is where we ought to invest our pedagogical energies. Students are, in our estimation, better served if blogging is employed as a venue for developing their writing, critical thinking, and technology skills in conjunction with their disciplinary and professional identity. The New Media Consortium’s Horizon Report (2008) declares that the “academy is faced with a need to provide formal instruction in ... how to create meaningful content with today’s tools” (p. 6), and as we hope to demonstrate, this instruction can take place with blogs.

Jan Schmidt (2007) was undoubtedly correct when he observed that people utilize the blog format in a variety of contexts, and as such one “can speak about ‘the blog’ only in a very general sense” (p. 1410). Given this diversity, we would like to define our terms and establish the claims for what has come to be known as educational blogging. Aggregating the assertions of Stephen Downes (2004), Rebecca Blood (2002), the *EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative* (2005), the Support Blogging! site and other resources, our position, reinforced by years of classroom application at USC, is that educational blogging: helps students to find a voice and develop interests in a medium that appears to have life and longevity; motivates student engagement in conversations about their ideas and positions; provides students with an opportunity to consider the tenets of responsible writing, since there is at least in potential a wide and authentic audience; empowers students and stimulates the initiative to write; and engenders information sharing, reputation building, and personal expression. Evidence exists to bolster at least some of these declarations, as Amanda Lenhart (2008) and her co-authors discovered that pre-university teens who blog are “prolific writers online and offline” and recognize that writing is essential to their success in later life (p. v).

Given its promise, an increasing number of academicians understand the opportunities afforded by an educative use of the blog apparatus. For instance, Edward Maloney (2007) speaks of the “stars of the second-generation Web,” among them blogs, which are consonant with “student-centered and active-learning models” (p. B26). In a related stance, Jean Burgess (2006) is convinced that blogs have the capacity to “contribute to a reconceptualization of students as critical, collaborative, and creative participants in the social construction of knowledge” (p. 105), and may moreover assist them in “developing literacies and competencies that are appropriate for the technological and social environments in which we all now work” (p. 106). To reinforce that point, Henry Jenkins (2006) and his colleagues see blogs as an important component in what they call “participatory culture,” where access and mastery help to determine who will succeed or be left behind in school and employment (p. 3). The Jenkins team does not, in our estimation, exaggerate but rather captures the academic and career implications of social media (Jones & Lea, 2008).

A CALL FOR BLOGFOLIOS

Considering our position on educational blogging it is to be expected that we advocate embedding this dimension into an ePortfolio, with the outcome being a blogfolio, which Marco Antonio Mendoza Calderón and Joaquín

Ramírez Buentello (2006) define as a union with “the customization power of the weblog and the evidence showroom of an ePortfolio” (p. 495). Calderón and Buentello, though, are not alone in recognizing the potential of this aggregate resource. Lorraine Stefani, Robin Mason, and Chris Pegler (2007), for example, believe that combining blogs with ePortfolios “could be truly transformative for students” (p. 140), whereas Ittelson (2008) holds the view that “Web 2.0 applications and tools, such as blogs ... residing within ePortfolios ... is the basis of the next generation” (pp. 33-34). See also Gerben, 2009. These claims aside, before accepting that blogfolios do indeed represent a next generation, most readers would understandably like to see an instance of their deployment in a higher education setting. For this we turn to a joint endeavor at USC involving its Web Services, Center for Scholarly Technology, and Writing Program, using the Movable Type package and operating in part with funding from external and internal grants.

In the USC project, called “myPortfolio,” undergraduate juniors and seniors enrolled in participating advanced writing courses are each provisioned a university branded and hosted blogfolio. James Farmer (2006) notes the importance of blogs as an indicator of digital identity, in part because bloggers “are not simply able to represent themselves through the content of their postings but also present much about themselves through aesthetic design, choice of media” (p. 98), and more. If one of the aims of the USC blogfolio is to help students manifest their higher-register selves, to establish and project a scholarly and professional persona online, then a simple but elegant interface possessing the institution’s imprimatur is of no small consequence. That this matters has been shown in studies, reported by Barbara Warnick (2004), which divulge visitors to a site determine its credibility largely based on variables beyond the identity, affiliation, or aspiration of the author (p. 257), and are more influenced by “professionalism of design, usability, ... and other factors that operate as signs of trustworthiness” (p. 262).

Performing in this USC designed template, at the start of the semester each student decides on a distinctive area of inquiry that is a subset of his or her academic major or future profession, which will constitute the thematic parameters of their work in the course, and this information is stated in the student’s sidebar profile. Before they begin to post, students are introduced to an array of award-winning blogs as well as to Schmidt’s (2007) “selection, publication, and networking” rules (p. 1412). Students also receive orientation to a variety of Web search tools and techniques that offer the means to become a skilled and discriminating online researcher. Within their sites students publish hypertextual and multimodal posts on current and consequential phenomena in their fields and of their choosing that are interesting, important, and not obvious

or already known. The entries fall into two categories: one where they initiate arguments with reference to and use of multiple online sources, and another where they locate and leave comments on blog posts, preferably written by people of stature, in their domain of inquiry. Along with publishing entries, students assemble a collection of sites and blogs, items of the highest quality in and greatest relevance to their areas, which they find and add as a sidebar link-roll, with the goal of making their own sites not just a repository of posts but also a resource for others.

As the above discussion indicates, USC is profoundly interested in having students assume a seat at the cyber-table and become active participants in the public conversations of their fields. This motive is found in Johndan Johnson-Eilola's (2004) observation on effective blogs as a professionalizing occasion: "They exist [in] complex rhetorical situations They make concrete intertextual connections and analyses. They provide interaction among multiple authors in a community" (p. 214), and they "require authors to read other texts, to analyze those texts, and to respond to those texts in writing" (p. 215). As Schnurr (2013) points out, "genres do not stand alone but tend to interact with other genres [creating] intertextuality and interdiscursivity" (p. 45). The blog stream, to be sure, is complemented in the USC template with a showcase ePortfolio component that is located in the sidebar of the site. Here students are offered two sections into which they may place their assets, academic work and extra-curricular experience. These artifacts, contextualized by an explanatory and reflective paragraph, may be text, audio, video, or image files intended to represent the aptitudes and aspirations of the students who produced them.

CHALLENGES AND OUTCOMES

While we hold that blogfolios have a powerful role to play in higher education, it is nevertheless necessary to address the challenges they face. Insofar as classroom blogging is concerned, obstacles include the provision of adequate training for teachers, the assessment of students' blogs, the creation of meaningful assignments, and the handling of potential information overload for students and faculty alike (Penrod, 2007, pp. 154-160). Taking these hindrances into account, we acknowledge that the objectives of developing students' literacy skills and nurturing their disciplinary and professional personae on a blog platform will be met incompletely. Pertaining to the part that the Internet plays in the construction of contemporary identities, Charles Ess (2005) argues that computer-mediated communication has caused neither a McLuhanesque "electronic global village" (p. 162), nor "its complete absence in the celebrated post-

modern fragmentation and decentering” (p. 166). Instead the outcome is an agglomeration of what Ess refers to as “partial publics,” a concept derived from Jurgen Habermas’ notion of *Teilöffentlichkeiten* (p. 163); included among these partial publics, according to Ess, are scholarly and professional bodies, some of which conduct their Web-based interlocutions through blogs. Yet the research of Susan Herring and her co-authors (2005) indicates that though there is an “A-list” of blogs to which many link, refer to, and comment on, most blogs link to one another sparsely or not at all, with the implication being that the “blogosphere is [only] sporadically conversational” (p. 1).

Herring et al.’s (2005) findings notwithstanding, we maintain that educational blogging can produce at the very least an incipient sense of self in the discourses of one’s field. Alexander Halavais (2006) is, we believe, accurate when he says that even bloggers who “might be classified as ‘mumblers’—without obvious comments or readers ... are seeking a way of conversing with the world” (p. 118), and of enjoying the “intrinsic reputational rewards” that one may reap from blogging (p. 123). These rewards were observed by Jenkins (2007), who discovered that his students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology “were making valuable professional contacts; some had developed real visibility ...; and a few received high-level job offers based on the professional connections they made on their blogs” (p. B9). A caution, however, must be sounded, as there are some in academe and the professional world who view blogs skeptically. The primary objections center on the consequences of an ill-conceived or intemperate post, which as Daniel Drezner (2006) phrased it, could become a “black mark that is difficult to erase” (p. B7). We acknowledge the consequences of careless entries, but such risks do not constitute, in our estimation, a sufficient case against the use of blogs for educative purposes.

With regard to ePortfolios, the potential difficulties are numerous. To put them in context, we evoke Jafari’s (2004) steps to be followed in the development of an ePortfolio system: conceptual design, which involves functional and technical requirements; software design, where the concern is human and computer aspects; and implementation plan, comprised of business plan, daily operation, and software upgrade (p. 40). See also Shepherd and Goggin (2012). Along this path the needs and concerns of a variety of stakeholders, including students, faculty, administrators, and technologists must be addressed. That these steps are not always coordinated nor stakeholders always consulted is succinctly critiqued by among others Javier Ayala (2006), who points to the paucity of research on “integrating student voices into the dialogue of electronic portfolios” (p. 12). David Tosh, Tracy Penny Light, Kele Flemming, and Jeff Haywood (2005) explored the high cost of marginalizing the student voice, and concluded that unless students accept ePortfolios as “useful and worthwhile,”

these tools would be seen as simply “another hoop to jump through.” As with our concession to the criticisms of educational blogging, we here allow that a successful ePortfolio is no easy undertaking. Nonetheless, if colleges and universities can convince students that growing numbers of prospective employers examine social networks like blogs to screen applicants (Wortham, 2009), and more than half of employers surveyed indicated an intention to use ePortfolios in the initial screening stage (Ward & Moser, 2008), then commitment would in all likelihood ensue.

Challenges assuredly exist, yet outcomes from the USC project are promising. One of our aims is for students to cultivate, as Teresa Acosta and Youmei Liu (2006) put it, “social capital” and “bridge the divide between the academy and society” (p. 23). Based on quantitative and qualitative data derived from course evaluations, student surveys, and student focus groups, it is evident that we have met with a high degree of success. Students indicate that their writing skills improve, and in apparent contrast with Gartner’s “hype cycles,” do not initially experience the importance and easiness of the blogfolio with over-enthusiasm followed by subsequent disappointment. Regarding the tool’s usefulness, students express great willingness to share their work outside of the course, and many use their sites for applications to graduate and professional schools, jobs, and study-abroad programs (Martin-Kniep, 1999). One student captured it this way, “I had an interview for an internship and they asked about writing experience. I showed them my blogfolio and I got offered the job.” It should in addition be remarked that our students are not working in a vacuum; Google Analytics logs disclose that almost half of the domestic visitors to the students’ sites are from outside of California, and almost one-quarter of all visitors are from outside the United States.

CONCLUSION

It ought to come as no surprise that for students, who ostensibly belong to what Diana Oblinger (2003) and others have called the “millennial” or “net gen” or “digital native” population, “technology is assumed to be a natural part of the environment” (p. 38). However what may be surprising, and we think positive, are the results from an EDUCAUSE *Study of Undergraduates and Information Technology* (Salaway, Caruso, & Nelson, 2007). This research found that students have discretion and recognize “[t]echnology is an enabler of learning when [used] effectively” (p. 13), while “[p]oor use of technology ... detracts from the learning experience” (p. 14). We hope that our argument on behalf of blogfolios manifests the former as it affirmatively answers the question posed

by Helen Chen: “Can we take advantage of some of these Web 2.0 technologies to create ... ePortfolio-related activities and reflective thinking” (Waters, 2007)? The advantage to which Chen refers resides at least partly in the recognition that blogfolios have the potential to stimulate students’ enthusiasm, and facilitate the possibility of authentic and transactional participation in what Henry Farrell (2005) calls the blogospheric “carnival of ideas,” where “the established, the up-and-comers, and the amateurs rub shoulders on a more or less equal footing” (p. B14).

At least one other study reinforced our findings that ePortfolios help students to “formulate career choices, facilitate entry into the workplace, facilitate entry into post-baccalaureate education, describe preferred career paths, [and] identify and develop skills and experiences relevant to achieving selected career goals” (Stephens & Moore, 2006, p. 527). When hybridized with educational blogging to create a showcase platform, the literature and our experiences at the University of Southern California lead to the conclusion that blogfolios can deliver significant personal, intellectual, and vocational benefits to students. Utilized in the manner here described, these digitized collections of artifacts not only serve as a valuable pedagogical tool, they may also contribute to the establishment of a deeper and perhaps durable scholarly and professional identity, or what Ittelson (2001) calls an “e-dentity” (p. 45), in the students who create them. Through the transferability of innovation, other institutions might at least want to consider this approach to technology in the service of mission-critical goals.

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